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Matriarchy/patriarchy

References to societies in which women assume political power and fight in wars, or in which property or the family name are passed down the maternal line, are encountered in Greek sources; however, it is in modern (that is, post-Enlightenment) readings of these sources that 'matriarchy' is considered to constitute a distinct period in the development of all societies, and consequently becomes associated with a range of utopian theories. Similarly, it is only in the nineteenth century that the ancient world's pantheon of goddesses become associated with supposed archaic cults of a chthonic Great Mother. These are modern concerns, reflecting modern anxieties and desires.

Attempts to posit and reconstruct the existence of ancient matriarchal societies usually depend on the theory of 'survivals', namely that mythic narratives, symbols, folk customs or linguistic idioms can be relics of archaic social structures that have been superseded by very different social forms (the classic definition of the term is to be found in Edward Tylor's *Primitive Culture*, Tyler 1871: 14-15). Comparative studies between cultures separated in time and space, bringing to bear ethnographic, linguistic and textual studies, are held to reveal common origins and evidence of archaic social structures: the nineteenth-century innovators of this technique claimed to be able to reach back to pre-Classical eras that had previously been inaccessible due to lack of written evidence. Similarly, oral and written mythological traditions in the patriarchal, Christian era are held to contain traces of pre-Christian thought, faith and ritual, which can be recovered through a process of excavation. Archaeological metaphors are commonplace, since they can link by analogy material discoveries with textual interpretation and with psychological and spiritual journeys into the depths of the self. This spiritual side has been a feature of the neo-Romantic current of matriarchal thought that took its impetus from Bachofen's criticism of scholarly positivism, and which runs through C.G.Jung's theory of the 'Great Mother' archetype and Joseph Campbell's mythic scholarship.

This interpretation relies on an ideological interpretation of myth that claims to find in it the repressed memory of real historical events, and on a theory of cultural development that sees societies moving from simple, communal structures to more complex, individualistic, and competitive social relations, and associates these social forms with universal male and female principles. It also requires a comparatist analysis of religion that works in a similar way to the methods of the comparative ethnographers: symbols or constellations of deities that can be identified as common to different cultural contexts are viewed as evidence for ancient common origins, rather than as arising by coincidence, or as the later product of cultural convergence or influence. There is a tendency to view social phenomena and modes of thought in sexed, rather than gendered terms: the world is viewed in terms of male and female principles that are associated with a series of oppositions such as reason/intuition, individualism/communitarianism, society/community, war/peace, concept/symbol, technology/nature, mind/body, sky/earth, etc.

Ultimately, the theory relies on notions of 'sex character' that developed through the nineteenth century, and which have been systematically critiqued by

feminists (see Frevert 1995). The idea of the separate natures of the two sexes reflects the sexual division of labour imposed by the bourgeois household, and by the masculinist rationalism of much Enlightenment thinking: women represent the domestic as opposed to the public space, nature, emotion and the body, as opposed to civilisation and intellect, and the spatial as opposed to the temporal/progressive. Naturally, one can trace similar oppositions back much further, but the idea of matriarchy in its modern form arises out of a set of nineteenth century concerns, in which the 'feminine' sex character gradually gains huge mythical and political significance until it can form the basis of fully fledged matriarchal utopias.

Initially, the idea that early cultures had been characterised by relationships between the sexes very different from what had been assumed to be a natural patriarchy, emerged from Enlightenment-era attempts to locate an original monotheism that had degraded into the polytheism of the pagan world (Lafitau 1724) or to investigate the history of property relations and family structures (eg., Ferguson 1767; see Coward 1983, Lyons 2004, Davies 2010: 49-106, for fuller accounts). This line of investigation is influenced in the early nineteenth century by Romantic theories of myth and cultural identity, which provide new methods and forms of evidence, as well as introducing narratives of cultural development that seek to unify theories of social structure, cultural change, ethnic and gender identity, and language and symbol (for a theory that anticipates matriarchal thinking, see Creuzer 1812). The infusion of Romantic ideas into the Enlightenment discussion of social status and property means that matriarchy now takes on associations of radical otherness: it is no longer just part of a discourse about the arrangement of relations between the sexes in an enlightened society but instead about encounters with cultural alienness and archaic layers of the psyche, and a rejection of modernity. Radical challenges to gender hierarchies represented by the experimental lifestyles of the Romantic period, combined with intense theorising about the separate natures of men and women, laid the ground for the extensive development of matriarchal theories in the nineteenth century.

As the nineteenth century progressed, philosophers and social reformers began to construct theories of mythic femininity as a counterpart to the masculine field of politics. This development was little more than a mythic clothing of theories of male and female 'sex character', in which men are associated with the 'external' spheres of history, politics, science, civilisation, modernity, reason, etc. and women with myth, emotion, religion, nature, the archaic, the unconscious, etc. Writers and campaigners began to suggest that the modern world could be redeemed by an encounter with a more 'original', holistic, 'female' or 'maternal' principle, which began to take on divine features (for example Casaubon 1834, Girardin 1851; see also Davies 2010: 7-48). British thinkers began to develop theories that suggested that traces of a prehistoric monotheistic Goddess religion could be found in myth and fairy tales, associating the 'feminine' with archaic survivals in the unconscious life of the nation (see Hutton 1999).

In the wake of the 1848 uprisings, programmes for the radical restructuring of society on maternal lines took, at least until the end of the century, a back seat to explorations of mythic depth and archaic states of existence. The name most commonly associated with the idea of matriarchy is the Swiss legal historian Johann

Jakob Bachofen, whose voluminous works combined methods from a number of different disciplines—Classical Philology, Ancient History, Historical Jurisprudence, Anthropology—in order to synthesise a mass of evidence from myth, literature and material culture into an account of the overthrow of prehistoric matriarchies. Bachofen constructs a relatively simple three-stage system that allows him to plot religious symbolism and myth onto a narrative of cultural conflict and progress. For Bachofen, the opposition of male and female principles is the fundamental driver of social change. The first stage, a state of ‘primitive promiscuity’ that Bachofen termed ‘hetaerism’, in which there are no stable family structures and paternity is not recognised, is associated with primitive fertility cults, chthonic goddesses, and symbols associated with the earth, marshland creatures and vegetation. The second, in which women rebel against the abuses and violence of the first stage, is ‘mother right’ (Bachofen never uses the word ‘matriarchy’, which was coined later); women occupy positions of religious and political power, family inheritance is passed down the female line, and symbols connected with the moon and agricultural plenty predominate. Eventually, men overthrow this system of female dominance and institute a patriarchal system associated with sky gods and solar symbolism: the exemplary systems here are Athens, the Roman Republic and the final triumph of monotheism in the West.

Each stage in Bachofen’s system represents progress away from instinctual life and organic communities towards a more abstract rationality and universal ethics, from natural law to civic codes, from enslavement by sexual instincts to regulated family life. Despite this, each transition is accompanied by resistance and conflicts between men and women that are of such violence that the new power has to repress all memory of the old system. All that is left are myths of male-female conflict (or West-East, or sky-earth) and remnants of ancient symbolism that can no longer be read correctly: memory of previous systems and the violence of the transition is repressed into the mythic unconscious. Each new system considers itself to be natural and eternal, but is also threatened by moments of regression into the past: Bachofen’s prime example is the ‘decadence’ of the later Roman Empire, in which ‘feminine’ religious cults and frenzied violence threatened the patriarchal order, and which he sees as repeating itself in the revolutionary violence of his day.

Bachofen sees religious and funeral symbols, mythology and pantheons of gods and heroes as key evidence in establishing his system, and forms of religious belief as fundamental drivers of social change. His historical theory is an attempted synthesis of progressivist evolution from matriarchal to patriarchal conditions with a cyclical theory in which previous conditions can return and threaten that progress. Although his best known work is *Das Mutterrecht* (1861: Bachofen 1948), it is in other texts, such as *Versuch über die Gräbersymbolik der Alten* (1859: Bachofen 1954) that a personal religious project becomes clear. Bachofen’s interest in the mystery cults of late antiquity, in particular the Eleusinian and Orphic mysteries, leads him to construct a narrative of salvation in which the male individual descends to an encounter with the archaic Maternal: an interpretation of mystery religions as remnants of matriarchal conditions that will have an influence on Psychoanalysis (Davies 2010: 217-212).

Bachofen's work can be seen in the context of a period in which ancient historians, legal scholars, myth theorists and anthropologists were exploring the history of human culture and institutions by constructing evolutionary developmental schemes. Such schemes were considered to be universal laws of development analogous to biological evolution, and could be used to support or oppose the theory of ancient matriarchies. Popular interest in the idea, and the use made of it by Marxists and some feminists (see Davies 2010: 107-162, Fehlmann 2011: 285-320) at the time, shows the intense contemporary relevance of ideas about a distant past that could be identified as the repressed Other of modernity.

Evolutionist theories of cultural development were challenged at the beginning of the twentieth century from two directions: the first came from fieldwork anthropologists who dismissed the work of armchair scholars and their speculative theories of history (Malinowski 1927 and 1929). The second challenge came from theorists who rejected the idea of cultural evolution, claiming instead that changes in social structures, material culture, etc., in the ancient world were signs of the displacement of ethnic groups through migration or invasion (a theory that formed the standard account of early British history for many decades). In this account, European populations have been produced by the layering of different waves of ethnic arrival and conquest, with patriarchal Indo-Europeans appearing as the last wave at the beginning of recorded history, and holding off the following waves of Turkic peoples. Despite its dubious reliance on ideas of ethnic difference and lack of convincing archaeological evidence, the dramatic nature of the story told in this theory has made it useful for writers who have tried to locate a historical moment for the 'defeat of matriarchy'; the most influential contributions have been by Marija Gimbutas (whose 'Kurgan' theory of warlike Eastern tribes overrunning peaceful matriarchal cultures in 'Old Europe' plays on Eurocentric fears of barbarian invasion: Gimbutas 1974, 1989 and 1991) and Jane Harrison (whose interpretation of Minoan culture as a matriarchy destroyed by invading Indo-Europeans helped ensure, alongside Sir Arthur Evans's compelling reconstructive archaeology, that the island of Crete still remains a centre of speculation about Goddess worship: Harrison 1903, Hawkes 1968, Gere 2009).

Alongside the debate about cultural evolution, the later nineteenth century saw the development of a set of theories that regarded ancient cults of goddesses as reflecting an all-embracing, archaic cult of nature and female spirituality: an interpretation for which there is little or no direct textual evidence, but which develops further the Romantic mythologization of motherhood. Through the century, it became common to assume that certain symbols, such as the Moon, were principally connoted as feminine in the ancient world, and that goddesses such as Demeter, Cybele or Proserpina were associated with natural fertility; pagan religions were interpreted as nature and fertility cults that derived from a common origin in monotheistic Goddess worship (Hutton 1999, Fehlmann 2011: 103-134).

The most influential works in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries showed a creative combination of comparatist anthropological methods, intuitive symbol interpretation, and unabashed mythic speculation: Bachofen's influence was significant in the German-speaking world (the first English translation did not appear until 1967), while anthropologists and myth theorists such as James Frazer

and Jane Harrison ensured that, in Britain, pagan religion was associated clearly with fertility cults, landscape and ritual (see Frazer 1890, Harrison 1913). Significant national myths—Celtic and Germanic—were now seen to contain evidence of pre-Christian religion, ritual and thought (see Weston 1920). The underlying story is one of female wholeness, constancy, and nourishing, and male renewal in ritualistic encounter with the Goddess/Mother. This Mystery narrative of masculine descent and renewal was a common feature of *fin-de-siècle* conceptions of crisis-ridden bourgeois masculinity, and which continued to exert an influence throughout the century, for example in Jungian psychoanalysis, in the theory of the masculine artist in his inspiring encounter with the matriarchal depths of culture and self in Robert Graves's *The White Goddess*, or in the combination of historical myth-making and female-centred spiritual practice in parts of the Goddess spirituality movement (Göttner-Abendroth 1996). It is a quintessentially *literary* narrative of masculinity in crisis and femininity as cultural salvation that provided a response to a particular cultural context of deep anxiety about modernity and gender. This is one of the key implications of matriarchal ideas in a religious context: the idea of masculine crisis and salvation in encounters with a mythic Feminine or Maternal, and the desire to 'rescue' a mythically understood Feminine from the origins of the patriarchal monotheisms.

It is little wonder therefore that the most effective critiques of matriarchal theories and Goddess spirituality have come from feminist writers: after all, what use politically is a theory reliant on nineteenth century notions of male and female 'natures', and which is suspicious of modernity, science and reason? (see Beauvoir 1949, Janssen-Jurreit 1982, Eller 2000, Millet 1971). In fact, feminist theorists and campaigners found other uses for the theory of matriarchy at the beginning of the twentieth century: most feminist writers at the time who employed matriarchal ideas had little interest in questions of Goddess worship, tending to be secular socialists or liberal Christian or Jewish campaigners. They employed matriarchy as a way of showing that patriarchy and the bourgeois division of labour between the sexes was not inevitable. Those who proposed the matriarchal reorganisation of society concentrated on education, family structures, legal reform and/or the eugenic 'improvement' of society (see Davies 107-162).

Esoteric writers who became interested in Goddess worship tended to find use for a theory that posited the violent suppression of a matriarchal culture, since it made it easier to assimilate modern experiences of violence: for example, the present oppression of women could be figured as the product of past violent upheaval, or contemporary ethnic and national conflict within European nations or their colonies could be thought of in archaic, mythic terms that gave them meaning. Particular groups or institutions (such as ethnic groups or religious traditions) are given a role as actors in the drama and assigned responsibility for the triumph of patriarchy. The supposed existence of a matriarchal period allowed for utopian projections into the past, and for the construction of a pristine, ethically superior essence that an individual or group could identify with.

For those who regarded the churches as the primary source of patriarchal oppression, matriarchy allowed the construction of a narrative of the imposition of Judeo-Christian patriarchy onto peaceful pagan cultures: Biblical narratives are here

read in the terms set out by Bachofen as mythic records of the triumph of patriarchy over matriarchy, and Jewish religion is sometimes singled out as the prime mover behind the 'patriarchal revolution' (for example Weiler 1984; see Weiler 2006 for a response to criticisms of this approach). This is not without potential problems, however. For example, in the *Woman's Bible*, a fascinating commentary on the Bible from a female viewpoint by an international collective of women writers led by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Jews are occasionally portrayed in an unsympathetic light as domineering patriarchs (Stanton 1895). The potentially anti-Semitic implications of this thinking came to the surface on a number of occasions. For example, certain German esoteric thinkers at the beginning of the twentieth century, such as the philosopher Ludwig Klages, constructed historical systems in which Jewish religion and thought take part of the blame for the oppression of pre-rational, matriarchal modes of thought and the imposition of an aggressive, unnatural reason (Klages 1929-1932), and Robert Graves's popular matriarchal theory of art, *The White Goddess*, is marred by the way in which Jewish religion is blamed for the malaise of modernity (Graves 1999: 465-466).

In the 1980s, feminist theologians, including those in Germany who were thinking through the history of their discipline in the wake of the Holocaust, raised criticisms of anti-Semitic tendencies in the work of some matriarchal theorists (Plaskow 1980, Daum 1980, Siegele-Wenschkewitz 1988). The debate that followed clarified an important distinction between critical feminist scholarly work on Christian and Jewish scripture and tradition and the desire to construct speculative historical narratives that assign blame to ethnic collectives: matriarchal theories tend to lack an extra layer of critical reflection on the origin and implications of their concepts and on the modernity of their narratives and images of ethnicity and gender (See Fehlmann 2011: 415-419).

In the latter half of the twentieth century, the theory of ancient matriarchies had been all but discredited by professional scholars, which meant that there was no longer a 'mainstream' debate on the evidence to refer to (on the archaeological and ethnographical evidence, see Fehlmann 2011: 135-184, Eller 2010, Röder 2001, Bamberger 1974). Nevertheless, the utopian potential of matriarchal myth remained apparent, and, as in the first half of the century, it was precisely the rejection by mainstream scholarship (defined as 'masculine') that gave matriarchal ideas their currency as a secret, repressed knowledge that women needed to recover. One of the key aspects of the status of matriarchy as modern myth lies in the usefulness of the idea in constructing holistic critiques of professional disciplinary specialisation, figured as an attack on a technocratic, instrumental, hierarchical, 'masculine' rationality in the name of a more intuitive, natural, egalitarian, 'feminine' intelligence.

Matriarchal theories begin to reappear in some critiques of the New Left by women who objected to the subordinate position of women within the radical political movements of the 1960s and 1970s, and who came to the conclusion that the idea of a common struggle against capitalism was meaningless without a struggle against patriarchy (see Distler 1989, Laugsch 2011, Fehlmann 2011: 383-414). In contrast with the secular, political line taken by the majority of feminist matriarchal theorists at the beginning of the century, some of the writers and

campaigners who broke away from the New Left sought forms of female-centred spirituality and historical interpretation as a counter to the masculinist stories of institutional religion and professional historical scholarship (cf. Daly 1979, Mulack 1983). Some writers, such as Jane Alpert or Adrienne Rich echoed earlier socialist maternalist campaigners by proposing a matriarchal alternative to the capitalist and patriarchal institution of motherhood (Alpert 1974, Rich 1976), but those interested in new forms of spirituality tended to employ theories of matriarchy in order to access 'deeper' levels of (pre-patriarchal) history, corresponding with deeper levels of psychic experience and female identity. Antecedents and inspirations were found in earlier theorists such as Gimbutas, Harrison or Graves.

The 'Goddess spirituality' movement took up these ideas, combining various mythic-historical narratives explaining the defeat of matriarchy with calls for the introduction of a female-centred religious practice often based on journeys of spiritual discovery in the depths of the psyche or rituals connecting the natural world, sexuality, and motherhood. There are connections with the developing ecological movement, in a manner that takes up turn-of-the-century interpretations that saw pre-Christian religion as characterised by female-centred fertility ritual, and which interprets female deities as ancient Earth goddesses (Christ 1979, Sjöö 1981, Göttner-Abendroth 2010). Excavations on Crete and Malta, at Çatal Hüyük in Turkey, or at Neolithic sites in Britain are taken to demonstrate evidence of early matriarchies: there is a certain circularity in how evidence that is used to build the theory is then interpreted in the light of it, and also a tendency to rely on an intuitive interpretation of landscape features and excavated structures through analogy with the female body (Levy 1949, Hawkes 1951 and 1968, Mellaart 1967, Stone 1976, Derungs 2000, Gere 2009).

The development of the feminist spirituality, Goddess spirituality and Wicca movements has been dealt with by a number of writers (from different perspectives: Bovenschen 1977, Adler 1979, Eller 2000, Göttner-Abendroth 2010, Fehlmann 2011: 359-82), but we should note here the strong attachment to the idea of the historical existence of matriarchies as a foundation for a system of beliefs and practices. Influential popularisers of Wiccan religion, such as Starhawk, have worked with a narrative that sees in witchcraft the remnants of a pagan matriarchal nature religion defeated by invading Indo-European peoples and then persecuted by the Church (Starhawk 1979; see also Murray 1921, Gardner 1954, Budapest 1980), although not all writers see the necessity of a founding historical narrative (Adler 1979).

The lack of concrete evidence requires the construction of large interpretative frameworks that synthesise different disciplinary assumptions, and that rest on clear, dramatic, violent and meaningful turning points. The overthrow of matriarchy may be interpreted as arising from the conflict between nomadic male war-bands and settled agricultural societies (Davis 1971, Budapest 1980), in ethnic conflict between the original inhabitants of Europe and patriarchal invaders (Gimbutas 1974 and 1991, Starhawk 1979), in the imposition of Judaeo-Christian religion (Graves 1999, Weiler 1984 and 2006), or more often in a combination of these factors.

As in the first wave of matriarchal radicalism, the ideas of matriarchal spirituality arose from the feminist critique of the masculinist assumptions of professional archaeology, of the patriarchal structures of religious institutions, of the invisibility of women in historical writing, and of the lack of identificatory narratives and imagery for women's spiritual practice. However, social constructivist theories of gender and the feminist critique of theories of gender essence rarely play a role; instead, femininity and masculinity are often assumed to be fundamental, universal principles, permitting both identificatory readings of myth across times and cultures and the reconstruction of pre-Christian religions in a way that fulfils contemporary needs. The association of femininity with the earth, fertility, archaism, psychological and spiritual 'wholeness', bodily experience and the rhythms of nature, as well as a pronounced suspicion of modernity, reason and science have led to polemics about the usefulness of the theory of ancient matriarchy for a contemporary feminist theory and practice.

In general, matriarchal theories have developed in contexts defined by a combination of factors: post-Enlightenment theories of 'natural religion', 'original religion' (*Urreligion*) or original monotheism, or an interest in syncretic or mystical theories of religion; Romantic organic theories of society and myth; the historical system-building characteristic of nineteenth-century speculative philosophies of history; moments of shock in colonial encounters with non-European peoples, or at revelations that undermined long-held assumptions about the Classical world; critiques of scholarly and scientific rationalism; and perhaps most significantly, moments at which a society is undergoing the renegotiation or radical questioning of gender roles.

Since the Romantic period, matriarchal theories have resonated with the desire for an immediate, intuitive encounter with buried aspects of the self in the mythic Other; the historical scheme makes history meaningful and offers the possibility of a more authentic, less conflicted way of living. However, since archaeological and anthropological studies have questioned and ultimately dismissed the evidence for historical matriarchies in favour of more nuanced descriptions of gender and power, matriarchy is itself now an article of faith, and a historical narrative constructed from the material of mythology has in turn become a founding myth.

Abstract

This essay will consider the origins and implications of the term 'matriarchy' as it has been applied to studies of religion since the Enlightenment. It will examine some of the ideas that have contributed to the development of the theory of the matriarchal past, and will explore some of the offshoots of these ideas in the 'Goddess spirituality' movement. It will set out the views of some of the most important theorists, as well as exploring the feminist critique of matriarchy, and examining the status of Christianity and Judaism as 'patriarchal religions' in this thinking.

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